

**The Relevance of Community Sentiments to
Australian Rural Youth's Intention to Stay
in their Home Communities**

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Abstract

This study explores whether community sentiment factors can mediate structural disadvantage factors in rural youth's intentions to stay in their home communities. 3,023 Australians aged 13 to 18 years responded to items assessing community sentiment (belonging, sense of community and social support) and subjective quality of life. Structural disadvantage was represented by population size. Participants responded to "If I could get a job here or go to University/College here, I would choose to stay in this town for the foreseeable future". Findings indicate all factors had a positive relationship with intention to stay. However, only belonging partially mediates the effect of size of community. The combined effects for all factors account for 19% more of the variability in intention to stay than the size of community alone. Discussion considers how focus on structural factors alone restricts the understanding of push-pull dynamics facing rural youth.

The Relevance of Community Sentiments to Australian Rural Youth's Intention to Stay in their Home Communities

A belief commonly espoused within the rhetoric of rural community discourse, political and popular, is that youth are the future of the community. Hence the loss of young people from the social and economic fabric of a community raises sustainability concerns from many sectors. For, though the renewal of rural settlement is evident with new-comers seeking inexpensive retirement options and lifestyle changes, such a demographic shift initiates changes in the identity of the community and the social meaning of its geopolitical space (Berry, 2000; Brown, 2002). As more youth leave small towns they take with them some of the town's identity related to their generation, in addition to their energy and ideas. There is concern in Australia that such change impacts on the everyday life of rural residents. It threatens a significant source of the national identity. It also exacerbates at a psychological level the distress being experienced at an economic level (Lockie & Bourke, 2001). As stated by one grazier, "If the young people aren't going to stay, who are we working for?"

In Australia, the politics of managing the regional "sustainability crisis", in terms of the exodus of young people from the "bush", has focussed on addressing structural disadvantage, particularly education and employment. One strategy has been supporting young people "boarding" in urban centres in anticipation that they will return to their rural roots upon graduation. However, in most instances they do not return.

The emphasis on aspects of structural disadvantage is understandable and publicly defensible given their visibility, and empirical evidence of the importance of education and employment opportunities in young people's migration decisions (Eversole, 2002; Lockie & Bourke, 2001). However, not all youth respond to structural disadvantage in the same way; there are some that stay. The education and employment focus of research to date represents a particular structural and economic definition of community and understanding of migration. It does not encompass factors related to the psychology of community, nor young people's relationship with their community of origin, discussed herein as community sentiment. The purpose of this paper is to present a snapshot of how young people across a broad spectrum of rural Australian towns feel about their home communities. We aim to explore whether their perceptions of belonging, sense of community and support mediate the importance of structural factors, implicated in size of community, in their intentions to stay in their rural towns.

Migration factors considered

While there are many variations on models for understanding migration decision-making processes, the classic push-pull model (Lee, 1966) is the foundation for most. It identifies factors considered in the migration decision as those that "push" people somewhere else in search of necessary resources such as jobs, and those that "pull" people somewhere else with opportunities such as lifestyle changes. This has also been described in terms of the "push" of the current residential location and the "pull" of the destination (Stimson & Minnery, 1998). However, the psychological experience of deciding to leave one's community is not a singular consideration of going *or* staying, but rather one of being "pushed and pulled" in two directions simultaneously. This is another way to interpret a push-pull model of community relocation decision-making; the dynamic movement between reasons to leave (eg push factors such as economic problems, availability of services) and reasons to stay (eg pull factors such as

neighbourhood relations and kinship). This is how we are using the push-pull framework in this study.

To understand rural youth out-migration, researchers have identified mostly push factors, although the push-pull model was not used in these instances. As in research regarding adult migration, this has included mostly structural/functional factors, such as lack of education, employment and occupation opportunities (Eversole, 2002; Cadwallader, 1992). Individual difference factors have included developmental processes of leaving home to establish independence (Jones, 1995) and orientations toward a desire for change (McAndrew, 1998).

However less exploration has considered what Longino (1992) and Moon (1995) have called 'moorings', those relational group dimensions that pull people to make decisions based on values of family, history and culture. Some such factors have been investigated with young people, mostly relationships with kin (Elder, King & Congor, 1996). There is little known about the pull of a young person's relationship with the home community, the social-spatial context within which structural and individual difference factors are embedded. Exploration of these 'moorings', or experiences and perceptions of community, is the focus of this study.

Community sentiment and the rural home town. Community sentiment is used in this paper to label psychological dimensions of the relationship between residents and their home community; a term used by others in this area of study (Hummon, 1992; Stinner, Van Loon, Chung, & Byun, 1990). We recognise that "community" can have many definitions including spatial and social elements, as discussed by Pretty, Chipuer and Bramston (2003). In this paper we define it in terms of social relations situated within geographical boundaries that identify one's home community (Hummon, 1992). Sentiment toward a community develops as a result of the interaction between people and between people and the physical place (Fried, 2000; Gustafson, 2000). We are interested in youth's sentiments of belonging, sense of community and support, as there is growing evidence of the extent to which youth develop these particular community sentiments, and its importance to their every day lives (see Pretty (2002) for a review).

We do not assume that these community sentiments are inherent in rural town living simply because of small population size. Freudenberg (1986) critically reviewed previous research and investigated whether psychosocial factors were a consequence of population size, which he interpreted as an indicator of density of acquaintanceship. He concluded that relationships between size and psychosocial factors are attenuated by the availability of primary social supports, which he argued may be available in a town of any size. Freudenberg suggested that other variables in addition to population size influence acquaintanceship density, thereby tempering the assumption that a smaller community *necessarily* provides a better psychological environment; a smaller community provides just an opportunity to be better.

Indeed findings from the few investigations of rural youth and migration reflect some of Freudenberg's conclusions. These findings also indicate how support and belonging in a small town may be experienced as both push and pull factors. Some examples are provided from the following research.

Belonging. The work of Jones (1995; 1999) explored relationships between young people and their home community in rural Scotland. Interviews with young people revealed the role of the local community, and its social and spatial characteristics in the development of youth identity. Jones highlighted the importance of belonging which was defined as youth's overall experiences of inclusion and exclusion. These

experiences were a consequence of interactions with community boundaries that were social, symbolic and spatial. Her research described the complexities of how youth experience small communities, where the very intimacies and familiarities supposed to generate and maintain belonging could result in experiences of exclusion rather than inclusion. In addition, costs of belonging were restrictions put on behaviour seen to be different and unacceptable to the home community. This issue of residents' accepting diversity was recognised by Freudenberg (1986) as an antecedent to people taking up the opportunity for acquaintanceship offered in a town. Jones' findings point further to the complexities of understanding the connection between young people's sentiment towards their local community, its size, and their decisions to stay or to leave.

Social support – someone to talk to. The role of developing and maintaining supportive social networks has been featured in much of the social-psychological research on migration. Few migration decisions are made in the absence of consultation with others (Brown, 2002). Accounts by young people of the "talk" occurring in the small Scottish towns in Jones' (1999) work indicated that conversations could on the one hand represent help and support, however, they could also represent influence, interference and intrusion. Hence having someone to talk with, like belonging, may come at a cost and be experienced as push and pull when considering whether to stay.

Sense of community. Sense of community includes many aspects of the individual-community relationship; it implies emotional bonding as well as the giving and receiving of assistance amongst community members (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Pretty and Chipuer (1996), described in Pretty (2002), interviewed over 400 young people and concluded that youth's construction of sense of community was comprised of these same dimensions. Pretty et al (2003) explored the relevance of sense of community to the place identity of youth in two rural Australian towns. One question the researchers posed was whether a young person would choose to live in a different town. As expected, lack of access to resources and activities to meet developmental needs was most important in discriminating youth who preferred to stay from those who preferred to leave. Resources represented push factors. However after these structural factors entered the discriminant function, sense of community also entered as a significant discriminating pull factor.

However, having a sense of community can also restrict individual behaviour, as it has a strong association with social control (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Again, this is consistent with Freudenberg's (1986) position that density acquaintanceships afford control over what is considered to be deviant behaviour and appropriate socialisation of youth. Indeed some researchers have discussed the implications of a negative sense of community (Brodsky, 1996). On the basis of these research findings a question regarding sense of community was included in this study to determine its push-pull relationship to migration intentions, and to further explore its relationship to structural factors identified in Pretty et al (2003).

Individual and community level structural resources. As indicated earlier in this paper, much consideration has been given to structural disadvantage and individual perception of this disadvantage in understanding youth migration. In this study we address these factors from the following perspectives.

Subjective Quality of life. Similar to the Australian context being investigated in this study, Elder, King and Conger (1996) studied youth migration in the rural Midwest of America. They uncovered a complex web of push-pull structural and individual factors relating to migration decisions. Young people's intentions were related to their

prospects for a college education, socioeconomic disadvantage, ties to their family and their religious community, and general level of happiness with life. Elder et al. described the emotional dilemmas faced by rural youth who confront plans to leave home “with a relatively dysphoric outlook” (p 420) being similar to those who faced the probabilities of future socioeconomic distress if they stayed.

Given the significance of individual perceptions of well-being to migration intentions, we chose to represent such perceptions in this study in terms of subjective quality of life. Subjective quality of life is commonly used to assess the combination of individual and community structural factors that together represent an overall sense of well-being (Cummins, 2000). Researchers such as Cummins emphasize the value of subjective measures as they are sensitive to individual differences in attitudes and behaviour not always detected by objective quality of life measures.

Structural disadvantage. In Australia, the level of socio-economic disadvantage, that is the availability of education, social, health, recreation and employment services and opportunities, is related to the size of the rural community. Systemic evidence of the relationship between population and disadvantage of rural towns has been described by analysts such as Beer, Stimson and Baum (see Stimson, Baum & O'Connor (2003) for a review). We used the population of each participant's residential community as an indication of the level of structural disadvantage likely to be experienced by participants. Given the range of population sizes of these communities (150 – 42,000), and the relevance of community size to understanding the complexities of community sentiments in rural towns (Stinner, Van Loon, Chung & Byun, 1990), we thought the use of size was appropriate to represent the independent variable of the research question.

Summary

We would like to reiterate that size of population is not assumed to reflect density of acquaintanceships, or the prevalence of positive psychosocial factors such as social support and belonging. Population size is used here as an indicator of only structural disadvantage, and the community sentiment variables and subjective quality of life are explored with respect to mediating the relationship of structural disadvantage and migration.

The study site.

Defining rural in Australia. Determining what is rural and “how do we know when we are standing in it” (Bourke & Lockie, 2001, p.5) is very difficult, but important if we are to appreciate the particular issues being raised in this paper regarding the survival of rural towns. In Australia, which is one of the world's most urbanised, but least densely populated countries, approximately 20% live in rural areas (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001) as defined by their geographic proximity to public services (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2004). It is important to note that approximately 70% live within the district of a capital city. This leaves a wide range of characterisations of towns considered to be rural, from the more remote towns of less than 150 residents to regional centres of over 90,000.

The Region. The region of Darling Downs is situated midway down the east coast of Australia approximately 100km west of the coastal State capital Brisbane. The Darling Downs encompasses 90,000 km² of rich pastoral and agricultural land. Though urban residences have been excluded from this study, the city of Toowoomba is the hub

of commercial and industrial activity and the regional centre (population 92,000). The area is the state's (Queensland) largest producer of agricultural produce.

The Darling Downs is made up of a number of 16 smaller rural shires. There are also two small townships (less than 30, 000 residents) within the region that were included in this study. The total population (excluding Toowoomba city) is 203,000 as at the 2001 Census. 31% of the adult population have completed high school, and a further 27% possess some post-secondary school qualification. The unemployment rate is marginally higher than the national average at 6.8% (as at 2001). The median household collectively earns between \$600 and \$699 per week (marginally below the national average at the time). 10% of the population is aged less than 15, and 13% is aged over 65 (the median age is 34). 2.7% of the population are indigenous, and 7.5% were born outside Australia.

Purpose

We attempt to further demarcate the relative importance of structural disadvantage, subjective quality of life, and community sentiment, (particularly belonging, sense of community and support) in young people's migration intentions. Given the undisputed paramount importance of education and employment considerations, we purposefully removed participants' consideration of these factors in the intention question. Other than hypothesising a relationship between structural disadvantage (as measured in terms of size of community) and intention to stay, we make no predictions as to the relative significance of the relationships of subjective quality of life, belonging, sense of community or support to the intention to stay, nor as to the mediation effects of these variables on structural disadvantage.

Method

The project

The opportunity for this study arose when a regional public health unit decided to offer a Youth Discount Card to encourage participation in various local activities. The public health unit invited the researchers to include a few additional questions. Given the extensive distribution of applications for this card, and as opportunities to access youth across diverse rural towns within the one project were extremely rare, we took the offer. As the "youth exodus" from this region of Queensland was a growing concern, we decided to investigate young people's intentions to stay and whether there was an association between these intentions and community sentiments held by the young people.

Participants

The number of young people in the region applying for the Youth Discount Card was 7691, and of this convenience sample 6,376 (83%) answered the additional questions for this study. Their ages ranged from 10 to 32 years. Gender was not a component of the application for the Youth Discount Card, and was therefore not available for this study.

Because the focus of this research was youth from rural communities, participants who could be classified as living in a community of more than 48,000, or who were older than 18 were omitted. The final data set retained 3,023 participants, half of whom live in communities smaller than 8,000 residents. We estimated that this convenience sample represented approximately 62.8% of the total comparable

population (approximately 4,812 youth aged 10 to 18 in the same region based on the 2001 Census).

Materials

Because of space restriction on the form to which we were adding our questions, only a few key items could be accommodated to represent community sentiment and quality of life. The validity of these findings therefore rests heavily on the validity of these questions.

The principle question of interest in this study is the intention to stay in the rural town captured in the statement “If I could get a job here or go to University/College here, I would choose to stay in this town/city for the foreseeable future.” This item was chosen from the Pretty et al. study (2003) described above. It was modified by including the preamble “If I could get a job here or go to University/College” to remove these structural resources from participants’ deliberations over the migration intention question.

To assess the relationship between community sentiment and migration intention decisions, four additional community referenced measures were considered for inclusion in this study. As space on the questionnaire would not allow inclusion of the full scales, or even subscales, a single item was selected. In each case participants were asked to rate the statement from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree” on a 5 point scale.

Firstly, participants rated an item designed to reflect community support (Chipuer, Pretty, Delorey, Miller, Powers, Rumstein, Barnes, Cordasic & Laurent, 1999). Their data, based on 464 rural youth aged between 10 and 18 years, indicated that one item correlated with the community support more highly than any other item ($r=.72$) and this item was chosen for inclusion in this study with a slight adaptation of wording to “When I need someone to talk to I can usually find a person to help in this town/city”.

The second and third additional items were designed to reflect belonging and a sense of community, adapted from the Neighbourhood Cohesion Instrument (Buckner, 1988). This measure was used in Pretty, Chipuer & Bramston’s (2003) study and their data indicated that two items correlated highly with the scale score ($r=.70$ and $.79$ respectively). These items were selected for inclusion in this study adapted to “I feel like I belong in this town/city” and “I have a sense of community amongst people who live in this town/city”.

The fourth item was chosen to reflect general quality of life. The Comprehensive Quality of Life Scale (Cummins, 1997) is a widely published measure with Australian normative data. This scale was used by Chipuer, Bramston & Pretty (2002) in a study with rural youth. Their results showed that this item correlated with the scale score more highly than any other item ($r=.80$). This item was adapted to “I am satisfied with my life at the moment”. Individual well-being or subjective quality of life has often been measured by means of simple one-time self-reports consisting of single-item or multiple-item scales that ask respondents to reflect on how happy they are.

The questionnaire also asked participants for their address, which in most cases included their postal code (zip code). This postal code was cross-referenced with the 2001 Australian Census data publicly available for each postal code area. In this way, the size of the community in which each participant lived was determined.

Procedure

The questions for this research were located in a separate section of the application form for the Youth Discount Card. An introduction to the questions indicated they were related to a research project being conducted in partnership with the University of Southern Queensland. Applicants were not required to complete these questions in order to qualify for a card; hence participation in this research was voluntary. Application forms were supplied to schools, colleges, universities, shops and malls across all towns in the Darling Downs region. Individuals returned their application by mail either individually or in class groups.

Results

Before assessing any possible mediation effects we wanted be sure that the three individual items measuring belonging, sense of community, and community support were not in fact one component. An exploratory principal components analysis was conducted and initial statistics indicated one latent root with an eigenvalue greater than unity. However this emergent structure was discounted as spurious given that parallel analysis (O'Connor, 2000) indicated that the structure was not above that expected by random occurrence. The three constructs were therefore considered separate for further modelling.

In order to assess whether belonging, sense of community, support, and quality of life mediated the impact of the size of the community on youth's intention to stay we followed the procedures set out by Baron and Kenny (1986). Figure 1 illustrates that size of community is associated with sense of belonging ($F=6.41, p<.05, 1-\beta\approx.99$), though this effect size was small ($R^2=.002$). The size of community bore no significant relationship with sense of community ($F=1.26, p>.05$), support ($F=1.97, p>.05$), or quality of life ($F=.04, p>.05$). Sense of community, community support, or quality of life can not therefore mediate the effect of size of community on intention to stay, though there may be a simple main effect for each on intention to stay.

Figure 1 about here

The final part of the analysis involved a hierarchical regression to determine whether size of community could explain any more of the variance in intention to stay once the effect for sense of belonging was controlled. Figure 1 also illustrates that sense of belonging ($F_{change}=4.65, R^2_{change}=.002, p<.05$) partially mediates the effect of size of community on intention to stay. While the degree of mediation is small, the combined effects for size of community, belonging, sense of community, support, and quality of life account for 19% more of the variability in intention to stay ($F=123.00, R^2=.20, p<.05, 1-\beta\approx.99$) than the size of community alone.

Further, beta weights indicated that size of community, sense of belonging, sense of community, community support, and quality of life all had a positive relationship with intention to stay. In other words, the larger the community (less structural disadvantage), or the higher the sense of belonging, sense of community, community support, and subjective quality of life, the greater the intention to stay. Partial and Semi-partial correlations are also presented in Table 1. While all the independent variables were mildly negatively skewed (see Table 1), these finding were not eroded by marked distortions in normality, linearity or homoscedasticity of residuals. Nor was multicollinearity evident.

Table 1 about here

It is notable that descriptively, the youth in this study appeared to be more satisfied with their lives (mean=81.6% of scale maximum) than the general population at between 65% and 75% of scale maximum (Cummins, 1998). In fact, only 5.1% of participants disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement “I am satisfied with my life at the moment”.

Discussion

This study constructed the “rural youth exodus” in the Darling Downs in terms of the relational aspects of community, in addition to the provision of structural resources (education and employment excepted), and subjective quality of life. The findings lend some support to the contention that young people’s migration intentions need to be considered not only in terms of the push of structural disadvantage, but also in terms of the pull of community sentiment, particularly the feeling of belonging. The findings indicate that for this sample of young people structural factors alone, indicated by size of community, were not practically significant in their relationship to intention to stay, though marginally statistically significant.

It is also interesting that size of community is only marginally related to belonging, and not related to sense of community, community support or quality of life. This finding reflects Freudenberg’s (1986) contention, as well as the position of some researchers that “smaller is better” is a myth when it comes to the quality of rural community life of young people (Jones, 1999).

The results indicate that inclusion of young people’s self reports of belonging, sense of community and support would offer additional information to any project concerning “youth retention”. However, given the high degree of association between these constructs evident in this study, and discussed by others (Pretty et al, 2003), we are not maintaining that assessment of youth’s community sentiments should focus necessarily on these particular dimensions. They contributed significantly to understanding intention to stay as a collection, which suggests further work in this area should expand the parameters of community sentiment in anticipation of strengthening its relationship to migration intentions. To the extent that community sentiments such as these may be considered attitudes (Jorgensen & Stedman, 2001), models of the relationship between attitudes, intentions and behaviour, such as the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1985) may prove fruitful in untangling the relationship between push and pull factors.

Limitations of the study

As indicated earlier, the measures used in this study were substantially limited in scope and depth due to its development as a study of opportunity, piggy-backed on another community project. This study utilised individual survey items in the same way most studies use subscale or scale scores. While these items did correlate highly with the scale score of the dimension they were designed to measure, they can not reflect every aspect of the constructs we explore in this report. Some caution in the interpretation of these concepts is therefore warranted. Nor can a survey design establish any causal relationship between these constructs. Nevertheless, the relatively

large sample size does allow us to reliably detect apparent associations, and accurately ascertain an experiential profile among these rural Australian youth.

The minimal relationship between structural disadvantage and intention to stay may also be a result of the measure used. The responses to the intention question assuring employment and education opportunities may indicate the paramount importance of these factors such that other structural facets of living in a small town were inconsequential to participants' intentions. Further study is warranted to better scrutinize the components of structural factors important to youth.

One characteristic of this sample of young people was their considerable satisfaction with their quality of life. As the survey was distributed through all possible community settings as well as schools, we have no reason to believe our sampling method itself was biased. While our participants consisted of sixty per cent of the population in the districts sampled, it may be that we have heard only from a homogenous select group of young people in the region. This limits any conclusions we might draw to those who do not perceive their everyday life to be disadvantaged.

Implications for community development

The findings encourage communities to value and nurture that which generates a sense of belonging in its youth, as the pull of positive community relationships may offset some of the push of structural disadvantage. The findings suggest consideration of how the "youth exodus" is implicitly constructed in any community's efforts to address the problem. The issues identified here are more complex than those suggested by analysis of educational and employment resources only. The generation of community sentiment demands ownership and action by the community as a whole rather than by a government service department alone. The concern is to support young people in rural towns by investing economic capital to develop structural resources, *and* by investing social capital to realise a sense of community and belonging, to develop 'moorings'.

At the time of writing this paper a few of the rural towns represented in this research launched initiatives to engage young people in "sustainable rural communities programs" being promoted by the state government. These initiatives go beyond the token representation of young people on councils associated with local governments. Rather, engagement in discussion of issues such as alternative industries, salinity, water rites, and tourism is giving youth some participation in decisions that will shape their communities. As a result they may choose to be 'moored' rather than 'retained' in their home town. Hence they may choose to stay rather than leave, but if they leave they may choose to return. This is the subject of our ongoing research with Australian youth from 'outback' origins.

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Table 1

Correlation of independent variables and dependant variable intention to stay

	Zero-order	Partial	Semi-Partial	Skewness
Belonging	.39	.20	.19	-.86
Sense of Community	.33	.11	.10	-.70
Population	.06	.05	.05	-
Community Support	.31	.12	.11	-.97
Quality of Life	.27	.07	.07	-1.17

Figure 1. Youth experiences mediate the effect of size of community on intention to stay.

